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DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/ENA, PRM/A, AND EAP/MLS
GENEVA FOR RMA

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TAGS: PREF PHUM SMIG TH LA

SUBJECT: LAO HMONG: CONGRESSIONAL STAFFDEL VISITS PETCHABUN CAMP, ENGAGES THAI ARMY AND MFA

REF: A. VIENTIANE 0332: LAO GENERAL LAYS OUT POLICY
1B. VIENTIANE 0335: GOL SHOWS OFF RESETTLEMENT SITE
1C. BANGKOK 1485: ENGAGEMENT ON LAO HMONG ISSUE
1D. BANGKOK 1340: AMB JOHN RAISES HMONG WITH RTARF
1E. BANGKOK 1305: AMB JOHN RAISES LAO HMONG WITH DPM
1F. BANGKOK 1225: NGO PULLS OUT OF PETCHABUN
1G. BANGKOK 1223: AMB JOHN RAISES HMONG WITH FM

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. A House Foreign Affairs Committee Staffdel visited Thailand July 2-4 in a fact-finding trip relating to Thai policy towards Lao Hmong detained in the army-run camp in Petchabun, and a smaller group of UNHCR-recognized refugees in an immigration detention center in Nong Khai, Thailand. The visit included a first: a ninety-minute foot tour of the Petchabun camp, the first access to the facility by outsiders (other than NGOs providing services) since it opened in July 2007. In meetings with the Royal Thai government (RTG) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF), and National Security Council (NSC), the Staffdel heard the Thai position: that the Lao Hmong were a bilateral issue to be handled between Thailand and Laos, and that Thailand did not want to undercut their neighbor's "national reconciliation" process by allowing refugee status and third country resettlement. The Staffdel also met with UNICEF and the French NGO Doctors Without Borders to discuss the Lao Hmong situation, and received a listing of 1,200 Lao Hmong in Petchabun who were participants or family members of anti-Pathet Lao resistance in the 1970's.

Comment: (C) The break-through visit to the Petchabun camp came off without the demonstrations and violence predicted by the RTARF. We will attempt to use the precedent to schedule future visits to see PRM-funded assistance in the facility, implemented now by the Thai NGO COERR. Although RTG interlocutors held to previously announced policy, the Washington-level interest may serve to strengthen civilian policy voices in internal RTG deliberations on what to do with the Lao Hmong, hopefully avoiding a forcible return of the remaining 4,800 people in Petchabun. There are signs the current "voluntary" returns are slowing down. On April 29th almost 300 people were returned, with no further movements until July 14 when only 67 Hmong were bused to Vientiane.
End Summary and Comments.

HFAC Staffdel Hears Thai Side of Lao Hmong Issue

12. (C) The House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) delegation was led by Professional Staff Member Jessica Lee, and included majority counsel (and senior policy adviser) Shanna Winters and minority chief counsel Doug Anderson. In an initial meeting with RTARF Lt.General Niphat Thonglek and assembled field officers from the Petchabun camp, the

Staffdel heard the Thai view of the situation of the 4,800 remaining Hmong in Petchabun, and 158 UNHCR-recognized Hmong long-detained in the Nong Khai Immigration detention center. General Niphat, who is Thai head of the bilateral border committee overseeing the current return process of Lao Hmong to Laos, offered the standard Thai view: that the Lao Hmong were illegal migrants to be treated in accordance with a bilateral MOU with Vientiane, without third party involvement. General Niphat described the RTG internal vetting of the Petchabun population, completed in January 2008, as "meeting all international standards", incorrectly suggesting that the U.S. and UNHCR had been involved in training the RTG interview teams. No new information was offered on the methodology or results of the internal RTG screening, however.

Thai Army Criticizes Alleged MSF Anti-Return Advocacy

¶3. (SBU) The RTARF's Niphat was sharply critical of French NGO Doctors Without Borders (French acronym: MSF), which pulled out of the Petchabun camp in May citing army interference in its assistance operations. According to Niphat, MSF "crossed the red line" in encouraging Lao Hmong to refuse return to Laos in order to hold out for third country resettlement (Comment: this was the first time we have heard this allegation against MSF. End Comment.) On a positive note, Niphat expressed support for potential IOM involvement in the return process, which has seen 2,500 Lao Hmong move to Laos over the past 18 months. IOM has proposed assistance activities to both the Thai and Lao governments which would position it as a de facto third party monitor in

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the returns.

MFA: "Very Small" Number Fear Persecution in Laos

¶4. (C) The Thai MFA's deputy director general of the Department of International Organizations more charitably described the MSF pull-out as "regrettable", but noted that a replacement Thai NGO, the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR), was already operating in Petchabun. According to the MFA's Ittiporn Boonpracang, "in principle" all in Petchabun should be returned to Laos as they were illegal migrants and "resettlement seekers." However, the RTG recognized that a "very small" number may face persecution upon return. A decision had not yet been about what to do with this group. Ittiporn emphasized Thailand's wish to avoid undercutting the "national reconciliation process" in Laos by allowing third country resettlement of the Lao Hmong, but suggested a recent opening up of attitudes by the Government of Laos (GOL) towards the issue. On the Nong Khai group, Ittiporn indicated that the MFA would propose to the interagency RTG policy committee that the detainees be released to join relatives in nearby Lopburi province. A possible mechanism for third country resettlement would then be explored. (Comment: this has been our advocacy stance with the RTG during the past several months. End Comment.)

Visit to Petchabun Camp

¶5. (SBU) On July 3rd, the Staffdel (accompanied by RMA Bangkok) was allowed access to the Third Army Area-run Petchabun camp, despite RTARF warnings of expected violent demonstrations. In the event, the camp was eerily quiet, with the residents lined silently along the dirt paths behind a screen of army personnel. General conditions in the camp are basic but livable, similar to what is found in the Burmese refugee camps, albeit with far stricter restrictions on personal behavior. The Hmong residents appeared intimidated by the large army presence and there was little free interaction with the Staffdel. However, a self-described "CIA

fighter" told RMA's local staff that there were 57 such families in the camp, with extended kinship groupings totaling almost 2,000 people. Some Hmong children at an NGO-run missionary school outside the camp also spoke to the visitors; several of the teenagers quietly expressed misgivings about return to Laos. The army arranged a meeting with a Hmong family which had agreed to return to Laos. The patriarch told the Staffdel that he had been interviewed on camera by a BBC crew which had visited his jungle village in Laos several years ago. The man related to the BBC journalists his extended family's difficult life in the jungle, and constant efforts to avoid Lao army patrols. When asked, he acknowledged he had no information on present conditions in Laos from prior returnees, and was unable to explain his decision to return other than to offer: "I don't know what else to do." When quietly asked (out of RTARF earshot) whether he wished to resettle in the U.S., he quickly answered in the affirmative. The day after the meeting with Staffdel, the man and his family escaped the holding area near the Petchabun camp and their present whereabouts are unknown.

No Gaps in Humanitarian Assistance Until Sept. 30th.

¶6. (U) The Staffdel met with COERR staff and observed distribution of charcoal and soap to the Hmong resident in Petchabun. COERR program director Ben Mendoza said relations with the RTARF in the camp so far were good, after an initial dispute regarding stipends paid to Lao Hmong assistants was settled to allow the NGO's retention of the workers. Cooperation from MSF in the turn-over has been good, with the former MSF clinic nurse now employed on site by COERR. Local public health officials (mostly ethnic Hmong from a Thai village nearby) now provide primary care. The clinic facilities appear clean and well-maintained, with sufficient stocks of basic medicines. Providing pre- and post-natal care is a major medical challenge, as an average of one child is born in the camp every day. Traditional Hmong home-birthing is preferred by many in the camp, and persuading expectant mothers to deliver in the nearby hospital is difficult. COERR's Mendoza stated he expected to remain in the camp only until September 30th, the date the RTARF has set to close the facility.

"Voluntary" Returns Slowing

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¶7. (SBU) The Staffdel also visited an army barracks 20 miles away used by the RTARF to hold returnees prior to deportation. One man told the Staffdel (through an army-arranged interpreter) that he had been "deceived" into leaving Laos for Thailand. Only 33 Lao Hmong were in the facility. A return of 298 people occurred on April 29th; the next movement (of just 67 individuals) occurred on July 14, suggesting that the RTARF is finding it more difficult to persuade people to return, despite a proffered "readjustment" allowance of about USD 330 per family over six members. Upon request, the army provided a blank "voluntary return" form signed by all Hmong who depart Petchabun. Written in Thai language only (not understood by the great majority of Hmong), the returnee only acknowledges that he/she "entered Thailand illegally and not fleeing danger, and that (he/she) will be processed in accordance with the Immigration Act of 1979." (Comment: the brief statement does not meet UNHCR standards for affidavits of voluntary returns. Ideally, it should be written in the returnee's native language, include an explicit statement that the return to Laos was voluntary, that the returnee had been counseled on alternatives and given an opportunity to change his/her mind. End Comment.) The camp commander improbably claimed that none of the 2,500 prior returnees had changed their mind during their stay at the transit barracks, which sometimes lasts several weeks.

Lao Hmong Offer Self-Accounting of CIA-trained Fighters

¶ 18. (C) Separately, MSF provided the Staffdel with a volume prepared by the Petchabun Lao Hmong with information on 57 families in the camp headed by a former CIA-trained resistance fighter. Family photographs, taken in Petchabun, accompanied names and dates of birth of kinship group members. Some pages feature photographs of the Hmong resistance in uniform, with military IDs and unit affiliation information from the 1970s. A total of 959 extended family members were included. In addition, the names and photographs of 47 adult children of deceased (or not present in Petchabun) resistance fighters were included, along with 271 family members. Evidence of relationship to their fathers was slim, however. We are in the process of translating the information (written primarily in Lao), and considering its best use in advocating for the group's protection.

¶ 19. (U) Staffdel Lee did not have an opportunity to review this cable before departing Thailand.

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